Evolving 'discoarse' into discourse: Ubuntu as a normative basis

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Introduction

In what is frequently referred to as the post-truth era, where appeals to emotion take center stage, polarization in public debates is at an all time high. In fact, some say it is the defining feature of 21st century politics (Doherty, 2014). People like US President Donald Trump regularly get their message across by keeping rhetoric polarized and emotionally persuasive (Hansen, 2017:n.p.). In many ways, and especially as regards his immigration policies, Trump has "turned public discourse into 'discoarse' [...] with his free, unchecked speech" (Stiehm, 2017:1) and has crossed a line that is alarming many. Yet free speech in the West has always been characterized by a level of discord and persuasion. And it is only in light of these more extreme manifestions that we begin to see the limitations of and question what is essentially an adversarial approach to communication, cultivated systemically within Western liberal democracies.

In this article I take a closer look at this approach and suggest that by framing issues in divisive ways and employing a chiefly persuasive rhetoric we can but reduce complexities, sideline 'truth' and obstruct the pursuit of cooperation, where this is possible and very possibly desirable. Considering these challenges, I then ask in what ways discourses can be reshaped and evolved to promote shared ends. This question is not so much about our response to any single public figure but rather about how we ought to talk about issues and what we could be cultivating in terms of democratic discourses.

Towards this end, I begin my article by sketching out how discourses can be conceptualized and why some discursive processes warrant reexamination. This is followed by an overview of how cultural and ethical values play a role in shaping and reshaping discourses. I specifically highlight the concept of 'normative adversarialism' (Karlberg, 2004) as a context for many contemporary discourses, discuss some of the reasons alternatives are worth considering, and finally offer the African philosophy of *ubuntu* as a normative alternative.

Discourses

In the following discussion, I outline how discourses can be conceptualized and why some discursive processes are problematic and warrant reexamination. A discourse can be thought of as an evolving way in which people conceive and talk of, or rather 'communicate', in verbal and non-verbal terms, about any aspect of the world and which informs their perceptions and actions (Foucault, 1972; 1980; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In other words, how we talk does not only reflect reality, it also shapes our experience of it and that experience continues to inform how we think and talk of it. Discourses help construct our 'reality' and influence our resulting actions just as those actions in turn edify our discourses.

This becomes problematic when people are exposed to a social or institutional context that cultivates divisive or oppressive discourses about issues such as race, gender or migration. Discourses that frame immigrants as criminals or law-breakers, for example, increase the likelihood of violence or hate speech being committed against them and, in

turn, feed back into the way society continues to think and communicate about migration. They affect public opinion and policy. Specifically, when immigrants are discussed as 'illegal' or as 'a dangerous threat' (Kariithi et al, 2017) and referred to using impersonal statistics and invoking the rule of law, public support for restrictive immigration policies goes up (see Haynes et al, 2016). Such discourses often espouse and promote the views, morals and interests of those who are advantaged in society and who determine how discourses pan out due to their privilege (Karlberg, 2004).

This is not always intentional. When journalists side with elites for example (military, political or economic) their positions appear neutral though this may "take place unintentionally as a result of established journalistic routines and practices" (Wasserman, 2013:69). Thus the frequent alignment of journalists and media people with positions of authority constitutes disproportionate access to cultural production (ibid) and arguably edifies the 'maps of meaning' that exist in society which, in turn, confirm the dominant consensus (Hall et al, 1999:251). As a result, those who are disadvantaged by a dominant discourse may still adopt its views. In the context of the above-mentioned case, for example, those who vote for tighter restrictions sometimes include immigrants who believe "immigration has gotten 'out of hand'" (Bierman, 2016:n.p.). Such discursive processes are worth revisiting. As such it is useful to clarify and question some of the deeper assumptions that inform our discourses and, in turn, their formal attributes.

Normative Adversarialism

The deeper assumptions underlying our discourses can be thought of in terms of their larger cultural and ethical context. In this section I specifically discuss how 'normative adversarialism' (Karlberg, 2004) influences public discourse, particularly in the West. One associated phenomenon is that of 'argument culture' (Tannen, 1998), which manifests a binary framing of issues and a chiefly persuasive approach to rhetoric. I discuss this adversarial emphasis, show how it perpetuates social conflict and propose that a cultural and ethical alternative could be useful in grounding public discourse.

While our cultural and ethical reality is diversely constituted and textured and while it constists of many counter-cultures and sub-cultures, Michael Karlberg (2004) asserts that in the West, we mostly subscribe to a 'culture of contest' where social organization is mainly negotiated in competitive and conflictual terms. From within the realism of this 'normative adversarialism' it appears natural to structure politics, economics, justice and many other areas of public life as a contest, academia included. Related to this, Metz (2014) identifies the prevalence of an ethic of individualism, which often (though not always) results in vigorous competitiveness and, in extreme cases, other people are seen as "a means to individual ends" (Khoza, 1994:4-7; Prinsloo, 1996:2).

Karlberg's theory of normative adversarialism is particularly useful in understanding why so much of our mass-mediated public discourse plays out in conflictual ways. The idea of argument culture (Tannen, 1998) can be seen as a specific expression of this. Argument culture "urges us to respond to the world – and the people in it – in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done"

(Tannen, 1998:3-4) and is characterized by a dichotomy or duality where issues are represented in binaries and the aim is to persuade others of one's position. Political debates are often shaped in this way, as are talk-shows, social media posts and many other, even civil fora.

Of course there are exceptions, such as the various models of public and community media that have emerged as a response to the dominant Western liberal paradigm (see Dahlgren 1992; Filson 1992; Habermas 1962). Yet these models, too, have developed within the greater realism of normative adversarialism and remain "underdeveloped and beset by various challenges" (Wasserman, 2013:72). Normative adversarialism assumes that individuals or factions have divergent or mutually exclusive interests and these interests can only be managed by harnessing competitive energy (see Karlberg, 2004). So while public and community media go a long way in creating balance and civility, they do not necessitate shifting away from conflictual or agonistic ways of conceiving the world (see Mouffe, 1999).

Other exceptions include the various collaborative reality programs that have emerged in recent times. However, here too, the greater realism that informs them is problematic. While offering a compelling alternative to their explicitly conflict-driven counterparts, their deeper conceptions of power speak to their broad adversarial context as they suggest that power is something to be 'had' and then bestowed – even benevolently, as is the case in ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. This assumes that power resides in the hands of some at the expense of others. Conceptions of power as capacity, capability and

ability may also exist in Western literature and consciousness but are usually constricted by the larger cultural focus on power as domination (xxx). While a more comprehensive discussion on the various facets of power exceeds the scope of this article, I want to mention that the immaterial concept of power as co-created and mutually empowering force embedded in the literature on *ubuntu* (see Louw, 2010) offers vast nuance.

So while conflictual communication is not present everywhere and all the time, and while discourse is not always intensely polarizing or related to a complete disregard for truth, a broadly argumentative approach to public discourse manifests frequently. Though this can address and uncover important facets of an issue and has contributed greatly to the generation of knowledge, say in the context of academic debates, it can also limit lines of action by favoring exclusionary or reductionist frames.

For example, South African media sometimes frame immigration issues in terms of whether immigrants, who are often referred to as 'aliens' or 'foreigners' and arrive in 'hordes' or 'waves', pose a 'threat to the livelihoods of local communities' or whether they are able to sustain themselves (see Kariithi et al, 2017:10). This not only creates an 'us versus them' binary, thereby othering fellow human beings who have a variety of backgrounds, circumstances and values but also completely obscures the evidence that suggests how many immigrants actually contribute positively to the economy and 'rejuvenate the entrepreneurial spirit in local townships' (ibid:7). Such exclusionary frames also foster division where collaboration or mutual understanding is possible and desirable. In the context of their realism it becomes natural to think, talk and act in

conflictual ways that obscure common ground, oversimplify complex issues and limit the range of available actions (Karlberg 2004).

The Kantian and utilitarian roots of this approach, which locate "basic moral value in properties intrinsic to a person" (Metz, 2014a:147) and have largely been assimilated through colonialism, significantly contrast the more harmonious and relational ethics that originate in the global South or in Asia. So while some maintain that conflict and egoism is the true basis of human motivation and that selfish and conflict-driven relations are inevitable expressions of this (see Branden 1982; Rand 1964), it can be gleaned that notions of selflessness and social reciprocity have also been evolutionarily valued and actively cultivated throughout history and across geographic spaces (see Szalavitz 2012).

Without denying the existance of conflict then, it is worth developing approaches that consider our ability to relate in harmonious and cohesive ways and to probe what fruits those might yield. This is especially relevant for societies that are now exploring and articulating identities that evolve from their colonial past. And so I ask what alternative normative theories can adequately ground the communication needs of today's highly diverse nations such as South Africa and other post-colonial societies?

Ubuntu as a Normative Alternative

In the case of South Africa, a collaborative approach characterizes its reconciliatory attitude that could also ground many facets of public discourse. While some question the link (Richardson, 2008), this approach is often attributed to a value referred to as *ubuntu*

(Louw, 2010; Van der Merwe, 1996). *Ubuntu* is widely defined as 'I am because we are' (Mkhize, 2008:40; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005:218; Tutu, 1999:35) and linked to the more or less non-violent transition of South Africa from apartheid to democracy. This process was "the result of the emergence of an ethos of solidarity, a commitment to peaceful co-existence" (Louw, 2010:2). *Ubuntu* is relational and mutualistic in nature and "articulated as one of the key philosophies underpinning South African governance and service delivery" (see Rodny-Gumede, 2015a:110). Though the idea of *ubuntu* is more prominent in Sub-Saharan belief systems (Metz, 2015), it is not merely African but has a universal dimension (Schutte, 1993:xii) and addresses some fundamental principles about human nature, which are helpful to contemporary social thought (ibid:20).

While some suggest that *ubuntu* as a moral philsophy is too vague, "cannot be codified" and is to be understood only on an intuitive "know it when I see it" basis (Mokgoro, 1998:2), others have attempted to theorize it as a normative moral theory and it is in the context of this 'ideal type' theorization that I refer to *ubuntu* as a compelling alternative to normative adversarialism. In other words, I'm not interested in how *ubuntu* has been understood or played out anthropologically and historically. I acknowledge some of its more violent manifestations in respect to non-conformity (see Mbigi & Mare, 1995) and know that it has been misappropriated and politically abused (see Tomaselli, 2009). However, the misappropriation of any value doesn't make the principle of that value any less attractive. This is why I'm interested in how it "should […] be understood and utilized" (Louw, 2010:17), which is an ongoing project. "*Ubuntu* is open to interpretation" (Blankenberg, 1999:43) and "still in the making" (Wiredu, 1980:36). As

such, I work with a contemporary and non-essentialist conception of an ethic with African influences that is relevant to 'the here and now' (Blankenberg, 1999:43) and bears cross-cultural significance.

In being pragmatic, rather than nostalgic or utopian about *ubuntu* (see Tomaselli, 2003), I also acknowledge that it emerges in societies, which exhibit both cooperation and violence (see Chasi, 2014a). As all peoples of the world, "Africans, who are associated with an *ubuntu* philosophy […] are paradigmatic victims" (and perpetrators) "of violent regimes of grotesque acts of war that take place between and within states" (Chasi, 2014a:293). Yet I propose, as Chasi (2014a:287) does, that precisely "because life is characterized by violence it is worth while that the African moral philosophy of *ubuntu* says people should seek the beautiful, great and good". As such, *ubuntu* foregrounds our ability to relate in harmonious and cohesive ways without disregarding our potential to do otherwise.

Ubuntu, which also means 'humanness' in Zulu, Xhosa and other Nguni languages of Southern Africa, implies that being human is "to belong and to participate" (Mkhize, 2008:39-40). "Individuals consider themselves integral parts of the whole community. A person is socialized to think of himself, or herself, as inextricably bound to others" (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2009:69). *Ubuntu* is both descriptive of the way we are inherently bound together and prescriptive because one is instructed to become a real person or to realize one's true self through communal, harmonious or cohesive relationships with others (Metz, 2011; Metz & Gaie, 2010; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005).

Metz (2015:77) stresses the recurrent themes of "experiencing life as bound up with others" and committing to others' needs and acting for others' good. The more one exhibits these characteristics, the more human one becomes. What this implies is that there are two ways of living. One is to give way to one's lower, animal nature (Gyekye, 2010; Ramose, 1999:53) and one is to strive towards a higher, genuinely noble way that all human have the capacity to attain (Bhengu, 1996:27). This (self-) realization of one's higher nature is achieved by exhibiting other-regard and by nurturing communal relationships with others (Metz & Gaie 2010:275; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005:222-228). "The more fully I am involved in community with others the more completely I am able to realize my own deep desires to the full" (Schutte, 1993:9). Individual identities are thus formed through the social realm.

This communitarian nature is not to be confused with collectivist or corporatist notions but should be seen in terms of a harmonious interaction between diverse individuals (Metz & Gaie, 2010) where individuals are valued, enjoy freedom of expression and are "not limited to what elders find agreeable" (Chasi, 2014b:495). The image of a musical piece comes to mind, where each note can only realize its full potential within the harmonious collaboration (rather than competition) of the various notes. Hence, the individual is treated "as special in virtue of her capacity to enter into relationships of identity and solidarity" (Metz, 2015:78). This relationalism is located between 'individualism' and 'holism' (Metz, 2015:79; Schutte, 2001:8-9). As Christians (2004:244) suggests, *ubuntu*'s "commitment to humans as participatory beings avoids the

opposition between individualism and collectivism by its unity-in-multiplicity".

Metz (2014b:6763) identifies "the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord" by fostering a 'we' identity, coordinating behavior and realizing shared ends. Therefore, the I/other dichotomy is seen as false and 'we' is seen as true (Louw, 2010:16). Such moral intuitions of a 'we' that precedes other, nested sub-identities reinforce a conception of power that is relational, where power is seen as that which grows between people rather than something that is held in the hands of any one group or individual. To exhibit *ubuntu*, then, is to act in ways that benefit others in mutually reciprocal ways (Metz, 2014b:6763). This solidarity is often associated with the concept of consensus, which features strongly in African philosophy, and has vast implications for the way in which discourses can be shaped and may play out.

In many small-scale African communities, for example, "discussion continues until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree with the outcome" (Metz, 2007:324). In this context, Blankenberg (1999:46) refers to the process of *pungwe,* which is a traditional approach to discourse where communities get together to consult on matters and explore solutions. Most notably, the leadership function is shared, "as it becomes a process of learning for both 'facilitator' and 'participant'" (Blankenberg, 1999:46). All members of the community pitch in and decisions are arrived at "by consensus, incorporating both majority and minority viewpoints" (ibid.).

Some African philosophers have attempted to extend the principles underpinning this

form of decision-making to democratic governance, proposing models of representative democracy that advocate a 'non-party polity' (Wiredu, 1996:135). In this context one may argue that consensus-oriented decision-making pressures a minority to acquiesce and that it can lead to collectivism and abuse of power. However, this perception would arguably derive from within a realism of normative adversarialism, in which power is seen as inherently conflictual and 'democracy' has become synonymous with the concept of 'partisanship' even though there is no necessary correlation (Karlberg, 2004:43). Partisan democracy is a culturally specific model of democracy and has been naturalized in Western societies. From within its realism social protest is seen to be one of the most powerful ways to manage abuses of power by creating dissent or putting the media in the role of watchdog. The distribution of public authority, decision-making and power is thus determined through contests (Karlberg, 2004).

In the *ubuntu* conception of the world, however, which assumes that human interests are not divergent but rather bound-up and complementary, this kind of power struggle loses its meaning. The goal is to work toward the greater good, primarily of others, even if this comes at somewhat of a material price to the individual. "Actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial, that is to improve the other's state, but also are ones done consequent to certain motives, say for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person" (Metz, 2015:77). Within this conception, defeating opponents and winning political campaigns or debates becomes counter-productive. Instead the aim of mass-mediated public discourse becomes to serve the public interest, even "at some cost to profits" (Metz, 2015:82).

In *ubuntu,* discourse does not primarily pan out as an argument. It strives instead for consensus and includes as many voices as possible in the process. Minorities become valuable rather than marginalized. The mediation of discourse happens in a "facilitatory manner and must be consultative and ongoing" (Blankenberg 1999, 45). *Ubuntu* cultivates respect for particularity and diversity and being an individual means being 'with others' (Louw, 2010:15). Diversity is valued and not seen as a source of conflict. Participants of a discourse 'agree to disagree' when consensus cannot be found (Louw, 2001) as the preservation of relations or unity is deemed more valuable than adherence to personal views or economic and material wellbeing (Metz, 2009).

Based on these values, several scholars (Blankenberg, 1999; Christians, 2004; Ess 2013; Fourie, 2011; Metz, 2015; Rao & Wasserman, 2007; Rodny-Gumede, 2015b; Tomaselli, 2011; Wasserman, 2013) have already begun exploring *ubuntu* as a basis for journalism practices and ethics where the media serve as a forum for thoughtful and constructive processes of democratic deliberation. In this context, the role of journalists, media producers, media houses, the government and other stakeholders becomes to enable and foster "communal relationships between residents themselves as well as between residents and the state" and any other groups or individuals such as businesses and civil society organizations (Metz, 2015:83). As Wasserman (2013:78) suggests, "Treating all people with human dignity means they should not be viewed as a means to the ends of adversarial, watchdog-type journalism, but as ends in themselves."

Broadly then, *ubuntu* journalism is located within a public service ethos (Rodny-Gumede, 2015a) and moves from the realm of libertarian 'objectivity' where journalists become 'brokers' to the realm of 'authentic disclosure' (Christians 2004), where journalists become mediators that take into account multiple interpretations and cultural complexities (Duncan & Seleoane, 1998). In this sense audiences broaden and a wider set of interests and concerns are opened up (Rodny-Gumede, 2015a). Citizens are empowered to seek consensus and solutions to social problems among themselves rather than looking toward the political elite. They become participants in the process of self-governance (Christians, 2004). This is particularly significant in the context of South Africa where language divides audiences and dictates to a large extent the public interests of various groups (Gassner, 2007; Wasserman & De Beer, 2005).

The journalism associated with *ubuntu* "empowers citizens to come to agreement about social problems and solutions among themselves" (Christians, 2004:235). This can be achieved by focusing on a wide range of viewpoints (Wasserman, 2013). Wasserman (ibid.) proposes that communicators momentarily remove themselves from the discussion so that they can really listen to the perspectives of others. In defining this approach, which takes into consideration a diverse array of what he calls 'divergent' interests and voices, Wasserman (2013) seeks to make democratic media an area of contestation and struggle in order to break the 'elite continuity' in post-apartheid South Africa. This particular definition of a befitting concept, however, could be seen as more of a normative adversarial project than a truly *ubuntu*-based one, where a deliberative and exploratory journalism that celebrates diverse views as 'complementary' rather than

'divergent' may be a better-suited articulation. His 'ethics of listening' where the media become 'gate-openers' rather than 'gate-keepers' and his call to "look for ways in which our narratives are connected, interrelated and interdependent" (Wasserman, 2013:78-79), on the other hand, are particularly in line with gaining a deeper understanding of the implications of *ubuntu* on the role of public discourse.

The rhetorical approach that is implied in this *ubuntu*-based ethic is a consultative, exploratory one that enables a wide array of complementary views rather than the chiefly persuasive and reductionist approach of mainstream discourses. *Ubuntu* scholars suggest moving away from Western notions of objectivity to multifarious subjectivity, where many views are represented and "grounded historically and biographically" so that "interpretative accounts reflect genuine features of the situation under investigation, and not represent the aberrations or hurried conclusions of observer opinions" (Christians, 2004:247). In this way, journalism puts the citizens in the active role of "participant in the process of self-governance" (Carey, 1997:139). According to Fourie (2011:38) the journalist "is not an observer" but rather an "active member" and participant of the community and its discourses. "Beyond facilitating a sense of togetherness and joint progress" (Metz, 2015:83) for citizens the media and mediators should also "aim to serve the transformation of society" (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:202).

In summary, the descriptive/prescriptive approach of *ubuntu* opens up "a space for the concerns, ideas and opinions of the community [...] stimulating citizen participation, community participation and consensus based on widespread consultation with the

community" (Fourie, 2011:37). With all this in mind the normative moral theory of *ubuntu* can play a significant role in reshaping and transforming contemporary discourses and models of communication. It provides an organic world-view of harmony and coordination and assumes that human nature is profoundly relational and 'other-oriented'. "*Ubuntu* ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community" (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2009:71-72). A 'normative mutualism' of this nature could significantly transform the processes and structures, messages and models of contemporary public discourse. It assumes that individual interests, while diverse, are not mututally exclusive but rather bound-up and that a competition for power is not the best way to get things done.

Specifically it motivates an enabling and open-ended, rather than narrow framing of issues and an exploratory rather than chiefly persuasive approach to rhetoric. Its cultivates an overarching 'we' identity that is comprised of a diversity of textured sub-identities and its mediation is facilitated in a consultative manner. In the case of the above-mentioned immigration discourse this could mean asking 'How immigrants fit into and affect society' rather than offering two narrow and limiting possibilities or interpretations. It also entails collectively exploring this question through a deliberative panel that is diversely constituted rather than creating two or more (elite) camps or factions that 'battle it out' in a public debate. It requires those involved in the process of communication to see themselves as collaborators and allies while acknowledging the relativity and contextuality of their individual experiences. Those who mediate such

discursive processes would encourage participation rather than fueling conflict or entrenching sides. Such could be the *ubuntu*-inspired elements of an approach to public discourse that contrasts argument culture and transforms the way we communicate.

Conclusion

As a contribution towards transformation, my article began with the assertion that contemporary public discourse has increasingly devolved into "discoarse". By acknowledging the role of cultural and ethical values in the formation and transformation of discourses, I then suggested that the normative adversarialism informing much of our perceptions and realities can and should be revisited. Normative adversarialism assumes that our interests are inherently conflicual and that adversarial competition is the best way to manage those interests. In looking for a normative alternative, I then offered the African moral theory of *ubuntu*, which assumes that our various interests are bound-up and complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and suggested that this relational philosophy could ground a very different approach to public discourse and mass-mediated communication.

Of course one need only look at parliamentary debates in South Africa and elsewhere to see that we do not live in a society where *ubuntu* serves as an overarching realism or larger discursive formation. While elements of oneness and interconnectivity are doubtlessly present and emerge in various contexts, such as the South African constitution, they don't form a normative foundation. In her 2015 survey conducted on South African journalists, Rodny-Gumede (2015a:123) confirms that most journalists

have a vague understanding of how *ubuntu* would translate into their work and there is a fear of it being used (as a Trojan horse) to push the political agenda of the government. In that regard, they view themselves as watchdogs of (adversarial notions of) power while striving to achieve a higher degree of community involvement (ibid.:123). A real gap remains in the translation of *ubuntu* principles into practice.

This is where efforts to develop alternative models of public discourse become vital. When considering communication that is based in a harmonious and cohesive understandings of power that "cannot be achieved apart from others" (Metz 2014b:6762), it is possible to create very different talk show models and reality television formats; to explore new ways of hosting political discussions and to innovate methodologically throughout the realm of communication and (social) media - transforming both how we perceive reality and how we create it. In order to do so it is vital to take a closer look at some of the formal properties of contemporary discourse, which I began addressing in the examples above, and to ask how these might be teased out further through the lens of an *ubuntu* realism.

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